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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002582

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NSC FOR CBARTON  
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STATE PASS USAID FOR DCHA/OTI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: MAKING SENSE OF VENEZUELA'S POLLS

Classified By: Political Counselor Abelardo A. Arias for reason 1.5 (d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) The August 4 release of a poll reportedly by the Venezuelan Institute of Data Analysis (IVAD in Spanish) showing a majority favoring the recall of President Hugo Chavez, prompted a fierce response from Minister of Communication and Information Jesse Chacon, who said he had seen other polls from IVAD giving Chavez the lead. Felix Seijas, president of IVAD, denied the poll came from his company, sparking a wave of speculation about the veracity of the poll and which side, the opposition or the government had planted it. On 5 August the former dean of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) solved the mystery when he claimed authorship. Meanwhile, a series of polls have come out giving each side an advantage over the other. The only thing that is clear is that Venezuelan polls are no help in predicting the outcome of the 15 August vote and while neither side will be surprised if it wins, the loser will tend to question a loss that contradicts its polling. End summary.

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Mystery Poll Causes Confusion  
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2. (C) A poll released 5 August, originally described as a poll conducted by the Venezuelan Institute of Data Analysis (IVAD in Spanish), showed 50 percent were in favor of recalling President Hugo Chavez and only 44 percent in favor of retaining him, with 6 percent undecided. The next day IVAD President Felix Seijas denied the poll came from his company and cited as proof the fact that his company, unlike the author of the poll, is on record as not believing in the so called ni-ni group (those that favor neither Chavez nor the opposition). Communication and Information Minister Jesse Chacon immediately denounced the poll as the work of the opposition's laboratory and blasted the press for allowing itself to be used as an opposition propaganda tool. He said other polls in July, including previous IVAD polls, had Chavez ahead by 10 to 35 points. Former dean of the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) Rafael Ramirez then claimed authorship of the poll on August 6. Ramirez said the poll was an scientific study conducted by a team of highly respected professors who interviewed 1200 people in mid-June. He said he did not know how the preliminary results from the poll were released.

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Polling Predictions for 15 August  
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3. (C) Since then a series of polls have been released putting President Hugo Chavez and the opposition within 6 to 9 percent of each other. A Cifras Encuestadores poll (CECA) taken 1 August found 55.7 percent would vote to recall Chavez while 35.5 percent would vote to retain him. Hinterlaces polled 1500 registered voters in 10 cities and regions and conducted focus groups with the working class and poor in five cities from 3 to 18 July. It found 40 percent would vote to revoke Chavez while 51 percent would vote to retain him. A Consultores 21 (C21) poll of 1500 registered voters taken during the last two weeks of July showed 43.5 percent planned to vote against Chavez while 49 percent favored him. During conversations with poloff Datanalisis president Jose Antonio Gil Yepes and Datos president Edmund Saade said their latest polls were similar to Hinterlaces and C21's results.

4. (C) According to Gil and Saade, the important trend to focus on is that Chavez has considerably narrowed the 39 percent lead the opposition had in July 2003. The pollsters noted that Chavez has even gained among the ni-ni, although they admitted that most still tend to favor the opposition. Those who are truly neutral comprise about 4-5 percent of likely voters. The Hinterlaces poll, which indicates Chavez gained 11 percent of the ni-ni between April and July of this

year, corroborates this trend as well. Both pollsters say those who are truly neutral comprise about 4-5 percent of likely voters, while Hinterlaces puts the figure at 14 percent.

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Why Chavez Would Win  
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15. (C) According to the focus groups Hinterlaces conducted, Chavez's steady rise in the polls can be attributed to rampant government social spending, the work Chavez is perceived to be doing for the poor, the economic recovery, and the image many have of the opposition as troublemakers. The C21 poll, which like Hinterlaces was conducted among registered voters, suggests Chavez is benefiting from perceptions rather than reality. According to the C21 poll, the Mercal, Barrio Adentro, and Mision Identidad voter registration programs reached the most participants (42.2, 26, and 25 percent respectively) while the other "missions" reached 10 percent or less. Yet when participants were asked if enough Venezuelans benefited from the missions, more than half thought they did. Saade said his company's polls showed a similar trend. The apparent success of the economy also continues to be a significant factor as 48 percent of respondents to the C21 poll said their economic situation was good and 64.5 percent said it would likely improve a little or a lot.

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Opposition Has Little Ability to Turn the Tide  
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16. (SBU) When asked what the opposition could do to improve its chances of winning, Saade and Gil said it was probably too late. Both faulted the opposition for its lack of clear leadership, its inability to stay on message and its failure to choose a standard bearer. Gil and Saade rejected the idea that the fear factor will have a significant impact on the outcome of the referendum. If anything, according to Gil, Chavez runs the risk of making a mistake with his accusations of fraud, but he too was down on the opposition's prospects for turning things around.

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Comment  
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17. (C) The polls are confusing, but the message is clear: the outcome of the referendum will be determined on 15 August only and not by the polls. The pollsters and politicians poloff has talked to say the close statistical race is one of the reasons political tension and pre-referendum violence has been low. Nevertheless, each side's strong belief in the polls that predict their own victory will make it harder for the loser to accept defeat.  
Shapiro